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NARRATOR

Martin Durante
Signature of narrator

Martin Durante
Name of narrator

821 Washington St.
Address

Oakland

(dated) August 25, 1981

INTERVIEWER

Sally Thomas
Signature of interviewer

Sally Thomas
Name of interviewer

2918 Benvenue #2
Address of interviewer

Berkeley 94705

(dated) August 25, 1981

Accepted for the Oakland Neighborhood History Project

by Kathryn Hughes (Project Director) 10/10/85 (Dated)

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Oakland Neighborhood
History Project

General Topic of Interview Ratto's and West Oakland

Date August 25, 1981 Place Ratto's International Grocers Length 55 min
821 Washington St.

Narrator	Interviewer
Name Martin Durante	Name Sally Thomas
Address Same as above	Address 2918 Benvenue #2 Berkeley 94705
Name & address of relative, friend	Relationship to narrator [friend, neighbor, etc.]
Birthplace Oakland	Length of acquaintance
Birthdate JULY 21, 1926	Occasion of interview Oakland Neighborhood History Project
Occupation(s) owner of Ratto's	

Interview Data

Subjects covered, in approximate order, spelling out names of persons and places mentioned

Estimated Time on Tape	Contents
0 - 5 minutes / 0 - 45 counter	Ratto's started as an American market by Durante's grandfather. Changed to Italian market by Durante's father in the early 1920s. Competitor -- Ferrero Brothers on Washington, between 7th and 8th Streets.
5 - 10 minutes/ 45 - 100 counter	Ratto's became international with Mr. Durante and his partner, Ray Garcia, 25 years ago. Brought in Middle Eastern, Indian, and African goods. Trade with Armenians, Persians, Lebanese, Israelis. Clientele from all over the Bay Area, including Egyptian and Brazilian Councils in San Francisco. Original market located at corner of 6th and Washington. (Across from 6th Street Market)

Use back of sheet if necessary -- continued on next page -

Interview Data, cont.
Martin Durante

Estimated Time on Tape	Contents
10 - 15 minutes/ 100 - 160 counter	Not familiar with 6th Street Market. Swan's like 6th Street Market, operated at the same time. Friday night good for bargains before shops closed for the weekend. Area lively before WW II. Durante family moved to East Oakland when Martin was born. Mother lived at 3rd and Myrtle. Her father worked at the Colombo bakery below their flat at this location. His mother remembers the blacks across the way who played wonderful jazz music. Her father first worked on the Brooklyn Bridge in the 1870s. Martin's father born in Italy, was 16 years old when he came to U.S., about 1909. First job was working on the Skunk Railroad. Didn't like that job, so came to Oakland.
15 - 20 minutes/ 160 - 220 counter	Martin's father married into Ratto family. Previously sold vegetables on Washington and 11th Streets. Rent $400./month before 1920. Washington Street popular for food business. Maxwell Hardware and Marcus Hardware located on Washington, too. Bought vegetables at Commission Market on the other side of Broadway. Good business maintained during the Depression.
20 - 25 minutes/ 220 - 300 counter	Family not affected by Depression. Lived at 105th Avenue in East Oakland. Father is 88 years old, moved to San Leandro in 1941. No recollection of "Tin Can Alley", but recalls expression "G-Men" for garbagemen as joke. Predecessor of Ferrero Brothers was Crestetto. Poor people have always shopped at Rattos.
25 - 30 minutes/ 300 - 390 counter	Family fron Genova. Everyone settled in West Oakland at first. Nothing on the other side of the lake. During bad weather grandfather could not get through to the College of the Holy Names (where Kaiser Center is now). Living in East Oakland, like a stranger to Italians in West Oakland and Temescal. Recommends Al Mathat to talk to. Mathat is French and in the hotel business. Business supplies from New York, San Francisco.
30 - 32 minutes / 390 - 430 counter	Sometimes shipments arrive in the Oakland port. Slavs and Spaniards worked for S.P.

Interview Data, cont.
Martin Durante

Estimated Time on Tape	Contents
Side 2 0 - 5 minutes/ 0 - 55 counter	Hotels run by French. Japanese fishing equipment sold cheap after internment. Italians as garbagemen. American Brass and Foundry in East Oakland owned by Boscacci family. Italians in restaurant business. Josephine Barjaci, owner & operator of Villa de la Paix and Francescos. Started with North Pole. Successful, hard worker.
5 - 10 minutes/ 55 - 110 counter	Redevelopment persuaded Ratto's to stay in the same location. Fire at Ratto's around 1972, '73. Likes Preservation Park. Helen Pardee wonderful person to talk to.
10 - 15 minutes/ 110 - 170 counter	Chinese like shopping at Ratto's.
15 - 20 minutes/ 170 - 240 counter	West African university students shop at Ratto's. Czechs, Romanians, and Hungarians, too. Blacks shop at Ratto's, too. Priorities discussed -- poor people like good food, too.
20 - 23 minutes/ 240 - 270 counter	Slump period after the war. Martin Durante started at Ratto's in 1950. Tessie Tasca, old West Oakland resident, Italian, who they still deliver to at 1504 Magnolia.
End of Interview	

OAKLAND NEIGHBORHOOD HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Martin Durante, Interview 1
Date of Interview: 25 August 1981; Oakland, California
Interviewers: Sally Thomas, Kathryn Hughes, Pamela Morton
Transcriber: Sally Thomas
Begin Tape 1, Side 1

Thomas: Did Ratto's get started as an Italian market?

Durante: No, it started as an American market. My grandfather had mostly things like sacks of sugar and eggs and butter and cheese -- staple things like that. It was really more of a regular American market. You can even see here (pointing to enlarged photo of the original Ratto's) the groceries, and coffee, and tea . . . That's a picture of it there. And a few sacks of different things. It wasn't Italian, no. Sardines, but nothing Italian in that whole picture that I can see.

Hughes: Except olive oil, maybe.

Durante: Yeah. That's true -- olive oil. That was a commodity though used by a lot of ethnic groups -- a lot of Slavs, Greeks. There was probably quite a few people that used that.

Thomas: When did it change?

Durante: My father changed it. Probably around -- I'm guessing now -- the early 1920s. That's when the character changed and he put the Italian things in.

Thomas: And other specialties as well?

Durante: No, mostly Italian. He'd bring in like parmesan cheese, romano cheese, and Italian specialties -- olive oil, all the candies, panetone, breads, things like that.

Thomas: So before then there wasn't that much of a demand for Italian foods?

Durante: There was but he had a competitor. It was the Ferrero

Durante, cont: brothers, which were right down the street here. In fact Tom Wolfe's building is part of it there, or maybe that's the parking lot. It was between 7th and 8th on Washington. They were the Ferrero brothers, and that's where my father got the idea. He was down in the basement -- he was showing him all the stuff that he had, kinda braggin' that he had all these good things. So my father thought he'd get some, too. (chuckle)

Thomas: What was the market called?

Durante: It was called Ferrero Brothers. They're both dead now.

Thomas: Were they Italian?

Durante: Yes.

Morton: When did it become international?

Durante: That's in my era. Mr. Garcia (Ray) and I, we're the ones who kind of gave it the character that it has today with all the Middle-Eastern things, and Indian, some African things. That all came later, and gradually. Started about twenty-five years ago. We started to turn it around to that.

Thomas: Was that because there was a demand for it?

Durante: Yeah. There was a demand for it. In fact, I guess the demand always was there. We just kind of got into it slowly. I can remember some of the things. We got bulgar wheat. We never used to have that. And we used to have the Armenian sausage -- now we sell lots of that -- bostrama (?). And we got the Greek fetta cheese, and started carrying the Greek wines, and all the spices they use. There are many things, but we got them gradually. It didn't happen overnight.

Hughes: And you got these particularly for specific groups?

Durante: Yeah, sure. In other words, if you had lots of Armenian

Durante, cont: trade, well then you could say, "Well this should sell to them," so we'd try that. Like cracker bread, we get that. Then one thing leads to another. Like the Persians, I think, are right close to them geographically. They'd use things the Armenians would buy, so when they started coming in we'd get things that the Persians used exclusively. It kind of worked that way. Then you'd get the Lebanese and the Israelis. They'll use a lot of things in common. They overlap on many things. Then you'll get the things that are special just for them. So that way you kind of build up all those things.

Morton: So it's a whole Mediterranean circuit.

Durante: Yeah. Then by having all the spices, we started getting a lot of Indian people. Then when you get the Indian people you started getting other things that Indian people used. You kind of build on that. That's how it happens.

Hughes: You've drawn on people from all over the Bay Area. People come quite a ways.

Durante: Yeah. A lot of them come from San Francisco. The Egyptian Council used to always come over here because they'd find everything they wanted. And the Brazilian Council used to come over from San Francisco. They wouldn't come real often, but they'd come fairly often.

Hughes: Do you think it all goes back to that olive oil that you started out with?

Durante: I guess that might have been. That could very well be if you had to pick one thing. That probably would be the stepping stone.

Hughes: What were the things that the early people in the 1890s shop for?

Durante: Lots of flour, big sacks of flour. People used to buy it that way. They put the sacks in the old wooden bins. And then eggs, and sacks of sugar. They used lots of sugar.

Thomas: Was it a much smaller market?

Durante: Yes, it was smaller.

Thomas: What other things were located in this building, then?

Durante: It wasn't here. This was at the corner of 6th and Washington. The freeway is there now. It was across the street from the 6th Street Market. It was on the corner, on the west side of 6th which the 6th Street Market didn't occupy. Even though this number says 829, (pointing to the photo), they must have numbered it in these early days . . . that's actually the corner of 6th and Washington. Later on that was referred to as 601. And on the picture it's 827.

Thomas: So this is a photograph of the original?

Durante: Of 601, yeah. Maybe you could find out when they switched over because that might be a clue to how old that picture is, really. If they switched in 1900 then we'd know the picture has to be older than that, wouldn't we? I've always wondered.

Thomas: Do you remember much about the Free Market?

Durante: I don't -- just things that I've heard. Because when I come down here to work my father keep me busy -- I never got to run around. (laughter) I probably never went in the place that I really know of. But from hearing about it I have a picture in my mind. I just didn't get around that much. I was small. Swan's was basically the same thing.

Hughes: Were they operating at the same time?

Durante: Yeah. Swan's had all those individual stalls. There

Durante, cont: would be a dozen people in a row selling vegetables. Or five or six anyway. They'd be hawking around, "Come over here. I got the strawberries cheaper." Friday night when they were gonna close for the weekend -- because a lot of times they weren't open on weekends -- people would come in for the bargains. They'd come in around closing time. Same thing down there -- they'd get rid of all the perishable. You could get a lot of bargains at that time.

Hughes: What time is this that you're talking about?

Durante: Before World War II. That's when this was a lively area. It was probably in the '20s and '30s. I can remember the '30s pretty well. The '20s I don't remember because I was born in the'20s. I was so small. So I guess I'm really talking about '32, '33, '34, '35 -- in that era.

Thomas: What is the relationship between this downtown area and West Oakland?

Durante: Well, everybody lived in West Oakland. So many people lived there. A lot of people lived in North Oakland, too. Our family came from West Oakland. We moved to East Oakland when I was born. My sister was born before. So we kind of expanded, our family.

Morton: In West Oakland did you live in an Italian community? Did you have other Italian neighbors?

Durante: I never lived there. My mother lived there. She was born there. They had black people right across the street from them. She'd say, "Oh, I used to sit there, and they played the best music," she'd say. Like when they were having a party on Saturday -- she was just a little girl -- she'd hear this wonderful jazz. My mother is 80 years old. This goes back to

Durante, cont: 1910. My grandfather had a bakery at 3rd and Myrtle before he opened the store up. It was called the Colombo Bakery. I don't know if the Colombo Bakery today is a continuation of that or not.

Thomas: Your mother was living in West Oakland. Do you remember where?

Durante: 3rd and Myrtle. They lived over the bakery. Her mother was born here, too. Her father came over here early. His first job was working on the Brooklyn Bridge -- in the 1870s when they built that. My father was born in Italy. He was sixteen when he came here. His father was already here. He joined his father here. His father was working on the railroad, building the Skunk Railroad. You know the one that goes between Willits and Fort Bragg? My dad's first job, he was sixteen, was working on that railroad. About 1909 he came.

Hughes: Did he ever have any connection with the railroad here?

Durante: No. He didn't like that job. He quit and came down to this area. I think he came directly down here. He had other stores in the area before. You see, my father married into this family, the Ratto family. My dad, I guess when he was young, was in the vegetable business. He told me that right here on Washington Street, just a block off, I think 11th and Washington, he paid something like four hundred dollars a month rent for the little, tiny, dinky stores. This was really hard to get. You couldn't even get on Washington Street then, it was so popular. People were paying enormous rents just to be even near Washington Street because there was so much business. I can remember even in the '30s it was just packed with people. You couldn't walk up the street. It was like New York City -- mobbed with people.

Morton: What kind of businesses were located on Washington Street?

Durante: They were mostly food. All your food shopping was here. There were other things, too. There were clothing stores, and there was the famous Maxwell Hardware up there. Marcus Hardware was down here. There were feed stores -- things like that. Mostly food. According to my dad this was the most valuable property in Oakland -- Washington Street -- and the hardest to get on. Everybody wanted to be on Washington Street. That's where all the action was -- all the people.

Hughes: Starting when?

Durante: Maybe a little before 1920 he was paying that big rent up there just to sell vegetables. He was successful. Places like Swan's weren't open every day. They were like wholesale places. They were open Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, or whatever. They were special places you had to go to, when they were open.

Thomas: Did he grow the vegetables he sold?

Durante: Oh, no. He'd go down to the Commission Market. That was always here. That's where they all went, and they still do.

Morton: On the other side of Broadway.

Durante: Sure. He'd go down there on Friday night when they were going to close for the weekend, then he'd get a lot of bargains. He'd buy a hundred crates of strawberries and come up and sell them real fast, Friday night. See, people got a lot of bargains on Friday. That's why it was mobbed on Friday. They didn't have a lot of refrigeration then. They had to move the stuff. If they didn't sell you could get it for nothing.

Morton: Did he buy from Italians?

Durante: He would buy from them but only because they were in that business. They did dominate that business for many years.

Durante, cont: Italians were all in that wholesale produce market. There were others, too. They bought from everybody. I don't think there was any bond of brotherhood. It was like anything else. They just worked where they could do business the best, to their advantage.

Hughes: As wholesale markets were they . . .

Durante: When I say wholesale, they were really retail -- absolutely, all the way. In the '30s you didn't have supermarkets all over, and shopping centers. There were just the small little stores. You couldn't shop well in those places -- you paid too much money.

Hughes: Do you think that the Depression was felt very strongly here?

Durante: Oh yeah -- sure it was. There was still good business here, but the Depression was felt because people didn't have money to spend. There was less money going around -- that's the only reason. But my dad never suffered during the Depression. He always had good business. I remember that.

Hughes: How did you experience it?

Durante: We lived in East Oakland where everybody was poor. But I guess I sort of felt we were kind of rich -- not that we were rich. It's just that we always had plenty to eat. I'd hear other kids talk. You know how you hear these things. We had shoes with holes in them, raggedy clothes. We didn't dress up either. I wasn't really sticking out like a sore thumb. But I was aware of poverty. And I know that we weren't afflicted by it.

Hughes: Where in East Oakland did you move to?

Durante: 105th Avenue -- way out there. It was just like the country.

Hughes: Is that why you moved there?

Durante: I don't know why my dad moved there. I never asked him. I was born in '26, and my sister was born in 1919, that was the

Durante, cont: one born here, so it was between 1919 and 1926 that he moved out there. I'm not sure which year, I don't know where they lived when they were first married. My father is eighty-eight now, and he's got all his faculties. Wonderful. He really is sharp, and he remembers everything. They live in San Leandro now. They moved there in the '40s, I think. Yeah, '41.

Thomas: What do you remember of "Tin Can Alley"?

Durante: I didn't even know what it was.

Morton: I saw a reference that said the Italian section was called "Tin Can Alley" because so many of the Italians were in the Scavenger business.

Durante: Oh, I know, they are. I have a lot of relatives who are in it. I never heard that, though. That's a new one. They used to joke and call them "G-men", like the FBI used to be called "G-men". Well, they called them "G-men", too, and it was garbagemen. That was kind of a joke. I don't know if that was very widespread, either.

Hughes: So far with the Italians we've talked to we get a definite sense of two different classes. We talked to a woman whose father was a shoe factory owner in Italy. And even though they were extremely poor when they first moved to West Oakland, they had cultivated taste. She was saying how they couldn't find milk-fed veal in Oakland, and they couldn't find sweetbreads. She remembers her family shopping at Ratto's, about 1910.

Durante: She's probably a little bit confused. I bet she was thinking of Ferrero's. You know how it is. Everything blends in later. Even people will tell me that the predecessor of this store was Crestetto, when that was the predecessor of Ferrero Brothers.

Durante, cont: People get things mixed up.

Hughes: She gave me an impression that people who had a little more money in their pockets would come shop here, not your average working class.

Durante: Oh no. We always had poor people, too. We had all the railroad workers, the Slavs that worked for the S.P. They didn't have any money but they all come here and buy things. We had all the ethnic business -- the French people over in the hotel business around here. It's true when they buy a few imported things it's a lot more money than buying something that was made here. Maybe they are considered luxuries to some people. But most people who were coming in here were poor. That's why you'd get so few people from Bologne -- they always had money. The land is rich there. The poor people were from the South. They still are the poorest in Italy.

Hughes: Did they emigrate later?

Durante: I think they did. The heavy immigration of the South was later.

Morton: Where was your family from?

Durante: From the North, from Genova.

Hughes: Is it true that most of the early Italians were Genovese? There were a few Piedmontese.

Durante: I think there were quite a few Piedmontese here. I think they came over at the same time.

Hughes: Did they all settle in West Oakland?

Durante: Yeah. Everybody did I think. If not here, North Oakland later. But I think everyone came from down here. That was the only place to live. I guess the other side of the lake -- there was nothing there. My grandfather says that on the real bad weather he couldn't get through from the bakery at 3rd and Myrtle

Durante, cont: to College of the Holy Names, which is where Kaiser Center is now. It would be all muddy. He couldn't get out there. That was going way out, going over to the lake. (laughter) I don't think there was too much then out that way.

Hughes: Do you remember when people started moving up towards Temescal?

Durante: That's before my time, too. I don't know when exactly. I guess it's fairly early, though. There are some really old sections up there. Naturally you figure out the road between here and Berkeley, so they had to . . . I don't know if they had streetcars going up to Cal, didn't they?

Thomas: I get the impression as they got more moeny they moved into Temescal.

Durante: Yes. I'm the wrong one to talk to about the Italian community because I did live in East Oakland, and it's almost like a club now. People my age knew everybody, knew who was doing what. I'm just like a stranger to them. But there are a lot of them. You have to get some of them who went to Tech High. They all knew each other. Oakland and Tech. All the people from Temescal went to Tech. But here they went to McClymonds.

Al Mathat is a good one to talk to.. He used to have a hotel upstairs. He's terrific. He's French. He knows so much about Oakland. He'd be nice to talk to. He lives near Oakland High. He had the hotel upstairs. And his brother-in-law had the hotel over here. They had several places all over. He had the Balwood (?) over here, and they had the Golden West which was where the Simmon (?) Brothers Hardware took the parking lot. He's been here all his life. He went to McClymonds. He could give you more of the flavor of the Italian community here than anybody else. He used to play ball with the kids. He could

Durante, cont: tell you what it was like growing up. Al's about sixty-three, four, or five -- around that area. He can really describe things. He can talk. He's good.

Thomas: Where does your store get supplies? Do you have connections and have you had connections all along with New York?

Durante: Oh yeah. We get a lot of stuff from New York. In fact the guy that was in today was from the New York House. They don't come very often, so I have to see them when they come. I knew he was coming -- I got a card, and I forgot. So when I made the appointment with you I said, "I hope this doesn't foul us up." (laughter) I forget a lot of things. But I buy from all over -- a lot of stuff from Los Angeles, a lot of stuff right here in San Francisco, anywhere. You always try to find the best deal.

Hughes: Do you have things shipped in directly to the port here?

Durante: Very seldom. But we do, yeah.. When we do it's a container. And that's usually the Greek olives, some olive oil from Spain. But the olives we always get.

Hughes: You mentioned the Slavs working for S.P. How early on did they come in to shop?

Durante: My dad would tell you that. They were early immigrants, too. A lot of them worked for the S.P. A lot of Spaniard, a lot of Italians, a lot of everything. But it seems like all the Slavs, I don't know why, I just have that image in my mind that a lot of them worked for the S.P.

Hughes: Spanish -- do you mean Mexican-Americans?

Durante: No, Spaniards from Spain. In fact my partner, his family came from Spain -- his grandmother. There are a lot of Spaniards here.

Begin Tape 1, Side 2

Durante: A lot of foundries around. Every hotel was run by a Frenchman. I don't know why. Al could probably mention a dozen families that he knew who had hotels.

Hughes: Were you aware of Japanese-Americans around here?

Durante: Oh yeah. They had lots of fishing places here. I remember when they were all interned there were big sales, and everyone was running around with fishing poles, getting everything for nothin' because they had to close and sell all their merchandise.

Thomas: Do you remember any families in specific?

Durante: I knew one because I went to school with them. They had a nursery. I went to Elmer's Junior High in East Oakland. I see them once-in-a-while. I run across them. They're very wealthy, doing well. They didn't get hurt too bad by it, but they had to leave. I remember seeing the fishing poles. Everybody on the street had a fishing pole. (laughter) They were selling the stuff, I guess, for nothing.

There were a lot of gardeners, too. And farming. Of course you don't see much of that around the city here. There was a lot of farming in Alameda, but I think they were all Italian and Portuguese there.

Thomas: What kind of occupations then could you say the Italians were in?

Durante: Garbagemen -- that was heavy. A lot of them got into the janitorial business. Even today -- they did very well. There was a little guy that used to come in, Louis. A little guy on a bicycle, he was a bachelor. Someone said he was a multi-millionaire, but he made it in the stock market. You'd hear these things. What else? There were different ones -- the foundries. There were a couple of Italians in the foundry

Durante, cont: business -- machinists. Like the American Brass and Foundry. That's a big company today. That's the Boscacci family. That's in East Oakland. They employed a lot of their own people, too. In fact one Spanish family I can think of worked for him.

Hughes: Boscacci -- do they have a restaurant?

Durante: No. But there were a lot of Italians in the restaurant business. So were the Greeks. And the Slavs, too.

Morton: Were the restaurants located near these markets?

Durante: We never went out to eat too much, so I'm kind of hazy on restaurants. It's just what I hear later. Like the Tadishes were in Old San Francisco -- that's the Slavs. There was down here on Broadway Luigi Gabiala (?) at 3rd and Broadway -- he just died recently, about 98 years old. And the Barjacis who had the Villa de la Paix and Francesco's. His mother was wonderful. She had several restaurants here. She started out with North Pole, on 7th Street in West Oakland. Everyone used to go there. She opened a big house, a great big old mansion down here called Villa de la Paix. That was a very big money maker for many years. Then the freeway took that property.. That's when she closed that. She was always successful -- worked hard, though, worked very, very hard. You'd look at her and, boy, she'd be all messed up because she was working hard. Her appearance would suffer because she was working so hard all the time. Her slip would be hanging down this far. But good food -- hard worker, working like the devil.. She never failed because she worked hard. Her Villa de la Paix was considered a fancy restaurant in those days. She'd get all the carriage trade for that. She had nice paintings she bought in Europe. You'd have to give her credit. She had a lot of good taste the way she decorated these places.

Thomas: What was her name?

Durante: Josephine Barjaci.

Hughes: When did she open it?

Durante: Heck, she was going strong when I came into the picture, about eleven years old, in the '30s. Oh yeah -- she'd call up and she'd get all kinds of stuff and we'd deliver it down to her. She was very successful.

Thomas: Was she living in West Oakland?

Durante: I don't know where she lived. But she probably did live in town somewhere, I imagine.

Thomas: Do you know if the Italians in West Oakland had specific occupations as opposed to the Italians that lived in North Oakland?

Durante: No. You mentioned now that North Oakland was somewhere to move to. I didn't even realize that. Was that a better place to live? Living in East Oakland I was not aware of that.

Hughes: West Oakland was a demarcation point.

Durante: With all these nice homes in West Oakland you'd think that . . . I wasn't aware that North Oakland was better. But it figures, I guess -- it was newer. People like new things. Remember the era when they were taking down those nice Tiffany type lamps and putting up these other fixtures they thought were more elegant? They even took the nice Victorian homes and put metal sash windows in, and take off the gingerbread. They thought that by making it plain they were improving it. They didn't realize that was the beauty, all that nice gingerbread. In fact, even this monstrosity on the corner, when the guy finished with it, he comes back to me and says, "Isn't it beautiful." Ohhh . . . He just ruined that building. It's just like a cracker box.

Hughes: How come you stayed here all these years?

Durante: We were going to leave, then Redevelopment twisted our arms. In fact when we had our fire we were going to move -- the building was condemned. Between the Mayor, the Chamber of Commerce, Redevelopment and the Spark (?) brothers across the street who are starting to (move up) (?) those two buildings -- they all talked us into staying. They got it reversed. It was condemned. Everything's okay now. (laughter)

Thomas: When was the fire?

Durante: It was about eight, nine years ago. We were going to move then. It was our chance to get out of here. But they twisted our arms. We were going to be the nucleus of this big new deal, convention center . . . Here we are ten years later and still not even there yet. We've always done well here, but like I say, people had to come here, because we were established.

Morton: What do you think about Preservation Park? Do you think it will bring in a lot of new business?

Durante: I like it. The whole concept is great. I like the Victorian row, especially the houses they're going to do over. Look at the nice job Warren Wilson did on his building there, the law offices. Beautiful. I like the Pardee House up there. Did you ever talk to them? If you could get an interview with Helen Pardee . . . She's so gracious, so lovely. What a gal she is. The time I got to visit her was about three or four years ago. If she's still okay she'd be somebody to get a hold of. You know, her father was the governor. That gal could step into the White House tomorrow and make everybody feel so great. The other sister is kind of senile -- she had a stroke. But Helen is a real jewel. She showed us the whole house. It's really a lovely place. Do you like scrimshaw? They've got so much scrimshaw

Durante, cont: there. Her mother, who was the governor's wife, collected it. So everyone would bring it to her.

Hughes: Right now there are a lot of Chinese and Vietnamese, Laotians coming into Oakland, I wonder if you see that reflected right around your store?

Durante: No. I can't say, in regards to the store, that I've noticed it. But I've just noticed little families collecting cans, which I thought was really nice. They just got here and they're already hustling and working, trying to do something, get something together. And they'll make it. You know darn well they will because they just keep at it. I don't know where they're all living. Right next door we have them; there's a little family. I guess they're not supposed to but I don't say anything.

Hughes: You've never sold Chinese food here?

Durante: Not too much, no, but they all like this market, the Chinese. They buy spices and things. They'll pick up Italian cookies. They love good things. They find things they like. Even the lady from the Economy Café used to come in and buy raviolis. I guess it was fun for her to have something different. I guess they feel like I do when I go to Chinatown. They're even newcomers. They still don't know a word of anything but we get by somehow. They're not cheese eaters. They buy rice and different beans and grains.

Hughes: What other groups have you seen coming here in recent years? Do you have many blacks coming in?

Durante: Yeah, we do. We have a lot of West Africans now, from Ghana and Nigeria. They come in from San Francisco, from the Peninsula. We have the things they want. A lot from Berkeley -- a lot from the universities. They're up there getting their degrees. We've been getting more Indians lately, too. Because we

Durante, cont: have a lot of the things they use. All the spices and the basmotti (?) rice. A lot of the Communist Block, too -- Czechs, Romanians, new families pop in. A lot of Hungarians, too. We have Hungarian paprika over there. We have quite a few Hungarians who shop here. They like things with poppy seeds. A lot of them use the streudel leaves, the filo dough. A lot of things overlap.

Hughes: Do you have many blacks from West Oakland?

Durante: Yeah, lots of them. Always have been, even when I was a little kid. I always remember as a little kid there used to be this little old lady, this sweet old lady. She used to come in and she'd say, "Would you sell an old donkey a dime's worth of chile powder?" Even as a little kid I thought that was so bad that she'd have to talk that way. She'd always say that. You'd always have black people who liked good things and would shop here. Heck, I had a guy that used to sell newspapers out on Fruitvale Avenue and MacArthur. He was one of the most meticulous cooks you ever saw in your life. He had to have the best French olive oil and the best parmesan cheese, fancy mushrooms. He'd spend the money, too. Everybody has priorities. You'd see poor Mexican people come in here, and they'd buy a good bottle of Spanish brandy. Everybody wants something they want once- in- a- while. We always did get everybody here. Everyone has a different priority, like the people from the Mediterranean have to have their olive oil. Even if they use less, they got to have it. I feel the same way. If it was fifty dollars a gallon I would still buy olive oil, too. I would just use less of it. You have to have some, anyway. It's one of those things. I think everyone's the same way. Even Indian people, frugal as they are, they still buy

Durante, cont: their basmotti rice because they love it so much. They pay twice as much as you do for the other rice. Everyone has priorities. Just like some people would rather buy clothes, and eat less. They'd rather wear something from Magnin's and eat beets. (laughter) Whereas people wear something from Penny's and eat chateaubriand. Anyone can be a good cook. You can't say, "Just because you're poor and purple you don't like to cook."

Hughes: Did you see any difference during the war years, World War II?

Durante: I was in the service, so I left myself. But I saw the beginning of it. We had rationing for a while. You'd have to hide the butter and ration it out.

Thomas: Who ran the store?

Durante: My dad was here, and my uncle. It was very busy. That was the busiest time. The only slump we had was after World War II. I came here in 1950. That's when all of downtown was suffering.

Hughes: That's when people were moving out of West Oakland who were your established customers at the time.

Durante: We gave up on West Oakland years and years ago for lots of trade. You couldn't just depend on West Oakland. At least we couldn't. But there's even still some people there. We still have a lady -- we don't deliver anymore -- and we still deliver to her on Magnolia Street. They're both in their 90s, these people. They're Italian. Her name is Tessie Tasca. She's a doll. She suffers bad, though, from arthritis. Her and Jimmy. She was born in this country. She's a great gal -- tough. They're at 1504 Magnolia.

End of Interview 1

San Francisco Chronicle ★★ Mon., May 25, 1981

New Downtown For Oakland After 15 Years

From Page 1

the federal government, makes possible the beginning of a long-awaited building boom in the city that has been without a "real downtown" for nearly 15 years.

To the casual observer, all Oakland has to show for $396 million worth of downtown redevelopment projects are eight blocks of empty, fenced-in construction sites and vacant lots, bordered on one side by the shabby facades of once-elegant Victorian buildings.

But city officials, wary of crying wolf after years of scrambling for funds and developers, are convinced that Oakland is finally on the brink of a rebirth.

The city that slowly lost its downtown in the 1950s and '60s has been struggling to rebuild it since then. Planners have waded through recession, tax cuts and federal cutbacks, turning to foreign and private investors when public sources ran dry, revising blueprints and finding new developers when old ones backed out.

"We're no longer fighting the 'Oakland problem,'" of businesses being afraid to move into a deteriorated urban core, said Doug Salter, chairman of Grubb and Ellis Development Co. and a prime mover in

At Webster and 11th streets, steel framework is in place for the first six-story phase of the Trans Pacific Centre, a project that may cover four vacant blocks with offices and swank retail stores with an "Asian flavor."

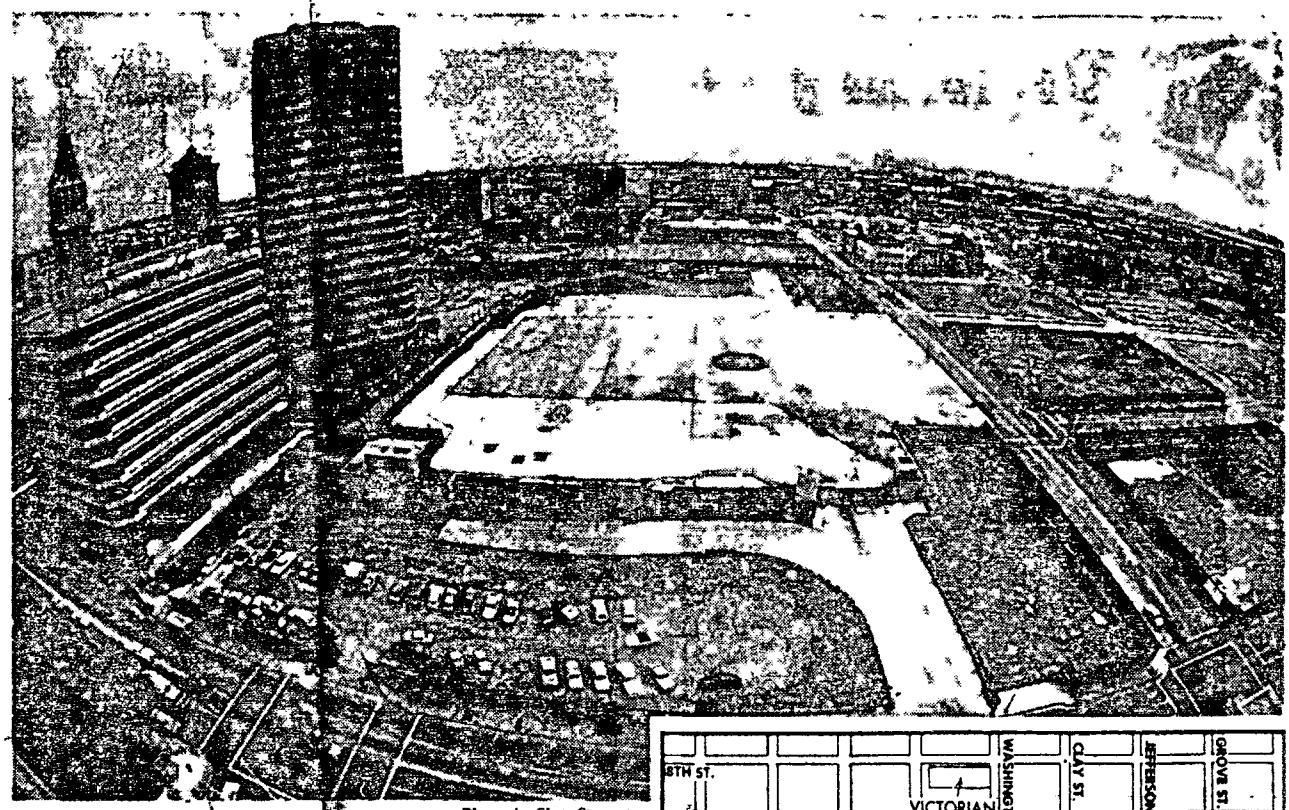
The $57 million development's first phase, four floors of office space and two of retail stores, is scheduled to be completed by late next year.

"Oakland has always had potential," said Trans Pacific Centre developer Marcus Smith, whose office on the eighth floor of the Clorox Building on Broadway overlooks several idle construction sites.

By July, Smith said, he will have studied market surveys of that potential and will let the city know his intentions for the remaining three blocks of the Trans Pacific property, which stretches from Ninth to 11th streets between Broadway and Webster.

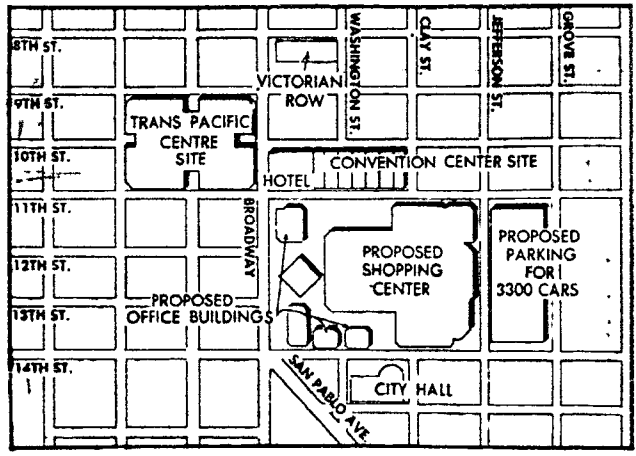
With a slight British clip, Smith rattled off the city's advantages like a Chamber of Commerce tour director — "The port, BART, a first-class airport, no place with better communications..."

Then, looking out his window to a huge vacant lot that on futuristic city maps is marked "shopping center," Smith noted, "It hasn't quite happened yet, has it?"



Photos by Chris Stewart

This picture of the downtown Oakland site, largely vacant now, was taken from City Hall



any of the city's four major downtown redevelopment projects, some of which have been on the drawing boards since 1976.

Oakland's original plans for a 15-block City Center project just south of City Hall — to contain five office towers, a regional shopping mall, a hotel and convention center and parking for 4300 cars — have been stalled by a sagging retail economy and uncertainty over the EDA grant.

Now that financing is complete

block oblong lot from Broadway to Clay between 10th and 11th streets — the big snag in City Center's future is the proposed shopping mall.

Major department stores that expressed interest in locating on the six-block shopping center site six years ago are reluctant to sign long-term leases because interest rates are climbing and retail sales are down.

City officials recently acknowledged they are considering scrapping the proposed 4.8 million-square-foot shopping mall in favor of planning

[illegible] development of office towers, small shops and apartments.

"The shopping center is stuck at the moment," acknowledged City Manager Self, who nevertheless is effusively optimistic about downtown development.

who kicked in at least $1 million are Pacific Overseas Holdings, a Hong Kong-based corporation whose subsidiary is developing Trans Pacific Centre; Oakland-based Kaiser Aluminum & Chemical Corp., Clorox Co. and the Oakland Tribune Inc.

And grants from Chevron US

the city's plans for rebuilding downtown.

All the sites have been cleared, but construction has not begun on for the convention center and adjacent hotel — to occupy a two- ping the proposal for a downtown shopping mall in favor of planning a mixed development of office towers, small shops and apartments.

"The shopping center is stuck at the moment," acknowledged City Manager Self, who nevertheless is effusively optimistic about downtown development.

Self is part of a unique grouping of civic leaders, businessmen, neighborhood and minority groups bent on rebuilding downtown. In downtown Oakland, the "no growth" philosophy simply does not exist.

To finance the city's first major downtown hotel, for example, 30 companies and community groups signed a "local equity participation" agreement in March and raised $7.5 million of the hotel's $44.5 million cost. The federal government loaned $5 million to the project, the city loaned another $5 million, and the rest is being financed with a bank loan).

The result is the Hyatt Regency Oakland, which will be built on Broadway adjacent to the convention center.

Salter, whose firm invested $50,000 in the hotel company, calls the financing agreement a "Cinderella story." Local officials point to the hotel as evidence that both the public and private sectors in Oakland are determined to make redevelopment work in a way that won't squeeze out the city's minority population.

Other partners in the venture who kicked in at least $1 million are Pacific Overseas Holdings, a Hong Kong-based corporation whose subsidiary is developing Trans Pacific Centre, Oakland based Kaiser Aluminum & Chemical Corp., Clorox Co. and the Oakland Tribune Inc.

And grants from Chevron USA, Oakland resident Stephen Bechtel Sr. and Oakland partners in the accounting firm of Arthur Andersen & Co. have made it possible for four community development and minority organizations to be part owners of the hotel.

Recent corporate and private investment in Oakland's downtown is the strongest indication of a turnaround from the late 1960s, when deterioration in the area was at its worst and businesses were [illegible]

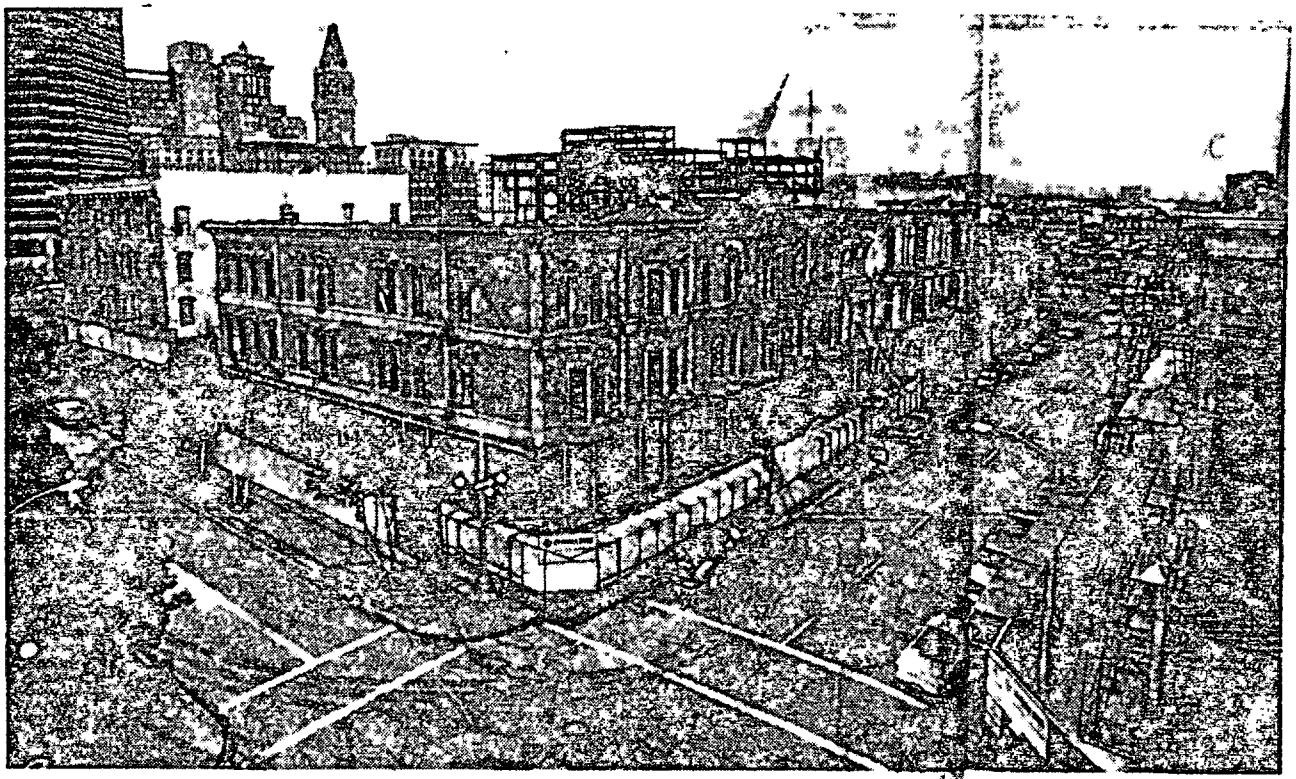
Only one impressive office-retail building was constructed in downtown Oakland from 1955 to 1970, and 200 retail businesses left the area during that time. In 1970, the entire 15-block City Center area was taxed at only $17 million.

"Somebody had to make the leap of faith and build here," said Salter.

When Wells Fargo Bank made the "leap" and built a 10-story office tower on the corner of 13th and Broadway in 1973, Salter recalled, the completed bronzed-glass structure was only half-leased for several months.

The reluctance of businesses to

Page 5 Col. 4



The city offered these downtown Victorians to businesses interested in participating in the renovation projects

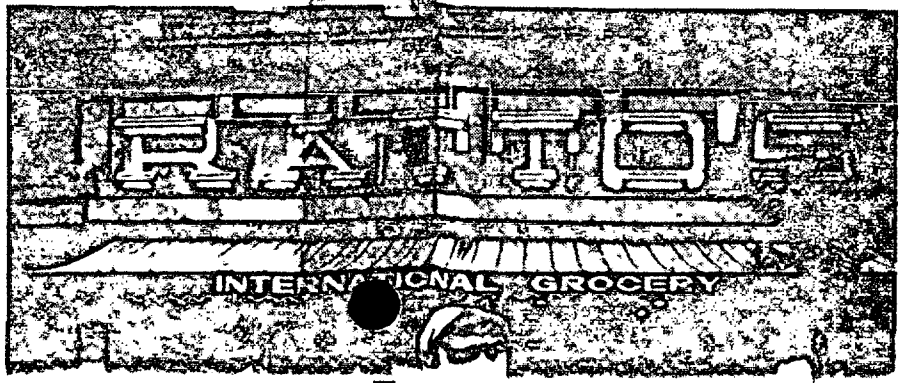
Redevelopment's Winners and Losers

At lunchtime, the line of smartly dressed business people snakes past the flour and garlic bins at G. B. Ratto's International Grocery and onto the sidewalk outside.

For those few midday hours, the area around Ninth and Washington streets comes to life and Martin Durante, Ratto's co-owner, bustles around to serve the patrons as he did with his father in the 1930s, when customers streamed in all day long.

But when the crowd goes back to work, filled with fresh pasta or giant deli sandwiches, Durante looks out at the barren sidewalk and [illegible] he had neighbors again.

"When I was a kid, this was just like New York City — you couldn't walk in a straight line because the street was wall-to-wall people," recalls Durante, 57.



on the Broadway side of the Victorian Row project, a few businessmen are anything but pleased with the redevelopment project.

Brian Lerch, owner of the California Loan Co. on 10th Street and Broadway, and Elwood Owyang, who owns Acme Liquors two blocks down at the corner of Eighth Street, are furious because redevelopment is forcing them out of their buildings.

Lerch, whose father started in the pawnshop business at that location in 1935, is on a month-to-month lease with the city, and fuming because the Victorian Row project forced him to sell his building.

"We've been good [illegible]ch to keep this Broadway location all of these years, and now we're displaced persons," Lerch says

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Page 5 Col. 4

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But when the crowd goes back to work, filled with fresh pasta or giant deli sandwiches, Durante looks out at the barren sidewalk and wishes he had neighbors again.

"When I was a kid, this was just like New York City — you couldn't walk in a straight line because the street was wall-to-wall people," recalls Durante, 55.

Now Ratto's is the sole surviving business in the dilapidated four-block area south of Oakland City Hall that someday — Durante is not holding his breath — will become a chichi area of shops and offices called Victorian Row.

Workmen are restoring the facades and reinforcing the structures of the once-stately hotels and office buildings that today comprise a four-block ghost town in the heart of Oakland.

Durante prefers the emptiness to the neighborhood's atmosphere 10 years ago, when even his loyal customers were wary of walking by tough bars and skid row hotels to get to his store.

While other businesses — a thriving produce market, a department store and a coffee company — fled the downtown area in the 1960s, Durante and partner Ray Garcia stuck it out and waited for the redevelopment boom they figured would come someday.

When it did, and San Francisco architects Glen and Richard Storek sold the city of Oakland on their plans for a Victorian restoration project, Ratto's was the only established business in the

Martin Durante, co-owner of Ratto's, knew the redevelopment would come someday

area to survive the mass condemnation of buildings.

Ratto's colorful interior will get a facelift, and the crumbling old Windsor hotel rooms occupying the two floors above Ratto's will be rebuilt into offices by the time the redevelopment project is completed in late 1983.

All that is fine with Durante, whose business has thrived even in the bad times because of a hard-core clientele.

"It's exciting," he says, hands in his apron pockets and looking across the street at a building where painters are working on a scaffolding. The first tenant, a law firm, is due to move in late this summer, and Durante looks forward to seeing foot traffic on the deserted Washington Street strip.

"All the time at parties I hear people saying, 'I'd love to (patronize your store), but I won't let my wife go down there alone.' "

"Heck, you're better off here than uptown — the only thing you're gonna catch here is loneliness."

Just two blocks away from Ratto's, however, on the Broadway side of the Victorian Row project, a few businessmen are anything but pleased with the redevelopment project.

Brian Lerch, owner of the California Loan Co. on 10th Street and Broadway, and Elwood Owyang, who owns Acme Liquors two blocks down at the corner of Eighth Street, are furious because redevelopment is forcing them out of their buildings.

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"We've been good enough to keep this Broadway location all of these years, and now we're displaced persons," Lerch says.

The 41-year-old Oakland native was prepared to move up to an even better location at 13th Street and Broadway, but the Oakland City Council passed an ordinance that forbids pawnshops from moving into downtown locations within 1000 feet of another pawnshop.

Lerch claims the ordinance was aimed directly at keeping him off Broadway, and he is suing the city in hopes of being allowed to relocate in the 13th and Broadway building, which is 800 feet from another pawnshop.

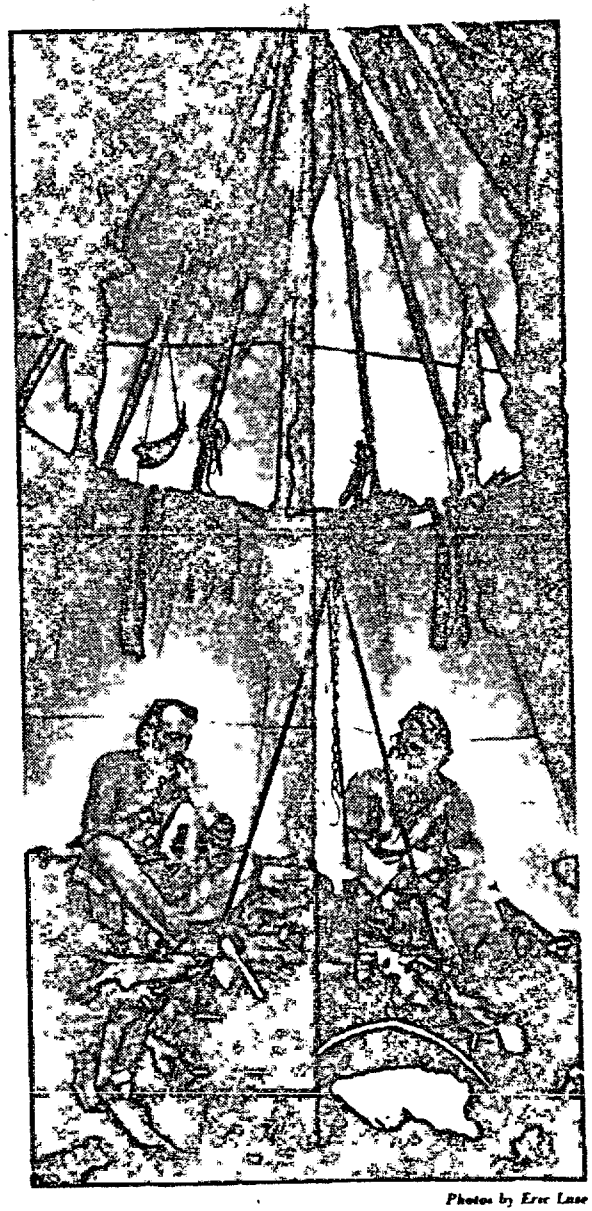
Owyang, who since 1959 has owned the tiny liquor store where he and his wife work, recently received a 90-day eviction notice from the city. But he says he'll refuse to budge until the city finds him another prime location.

"I was willing to invest a half a million here to fix this place up, and then they condemned the building," he says, agitated.

"I don't want to go to West Oakland, East Oakland or any big crime area — they couldn't pay me $1 million to go there."

— Ann Bancr

Drawing A Bead on The Past



Photos by Eric Luse

More than 300 modern mountain men gathered in the hills outside Sonora this weekend to fire authentic flintlock pistols and rifles at animal targets. This was the fourth annual gathering of the club, known as the Sonora Smoke Pullers, and shooters came from all over California and Oregon to compete. Above, Chuck Reynolds aimed his muzzle-loading rifle during the shooting competition. Rifles like Reynolds' can cost up to $2000. The shooters also dress the part of early 19th century mountain men, and some even erect tipis like the one at right where Reynolds and Doug Teakell shared a pipe after the shooting.

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Big Heroin Bust

Parking problem looms in Old Oakland areas

By Eleanor Edwards

A bitter spat over a parking lot between the owners of Ratto's and the developers of Victorian Row is only the tip of a larger, more serious problem, both sides say: a parking garage is desperately needed in the Old Oakland area that is undergoing a revitalization now.

Until a garage is built — and none is planned nor does the city own land in the area on which to build a garage — both sides say their businesses are doomed without the disputed lot.

If he isn't allowed to keep the small parking lot on Washington Street the store has owned and used for 20 years or more, Ratto's will have to move, Martin Durante, co-owner of the popular grocery and restaurant, says.

"You can't expect people to carry 25 pounds of rice, a gallon of olive oil and five pounds of garbanzos to a parking lot two blocks away," Durante says.

The land has been promised by the city to the developers of Victorian Row as part of the redevelopment project for at least the past five years. Storek and Storek, a San Francisco architectural firm, is converting two blocks of dilapidated buildings dating from the turn of the century to offices and shops. Without parking, Glenn Storek says, he cannot lease the space.

"Our need for parking is much greater than theirs," Storek says. "Frankly, I think they're being uncooperative, to put it mildly, and irrational."

Ratto's owns a second parking lot on Ninth Street directly behind its building, and Storek said his firm prepared a landscaping plan for the lot without charge. In addition, Storek proposed that his firm and Ratto's go to the city, perhaps along with representatives of Swan's and Housewives Market, to ask that a parking garage be built for the area.

"They have adequate parking even if they sell this lot to the city. We were really dismayed to hear that Ratto's is taking the position they now are taking because we thought we had an understanding," Storek says.

Durante says he bought the second parking lot for tenants of his building and adds, "Why should we be penalized for thinking ahead and they didn't?"

Storek, noting that the upper floors of Ratto's are fire-damaged and closed, says the building is "a wreck" and that saving the lot for tenants "is putting the cart before the horse."

"We are very concerned about the appearance of his building and want to see it restored. Everybody loves Ratto's and thinks it's a great old place, but I'm getting a little tired of them. They haven't spent a dime on their building," Storek says.

Durante, for his part, criticizes Storek for planning his development with "zilch" parking.

"I'm sorry that he's upset but my point is that he said we would all try together to get a parking garage but that's not good enough. I have to have something definite. There is no garage being built. Maybe it'll never be built. Why can't I keep my lot until then? At least I have something definite now."

Durante has organized a petition drive to "preserve the ethnic character of Ratto's" and had collected over 200 signatures by last week. He plans to go to the city council with his appeal next Tuesday.

In the meantime, the city is going ahead with work on an L-shaped portion of land at the corner of Washington and Eighth Streets already owned by the redevelopment agency. Ratto's land, between the new parking lot and the recently renovated LaSalle building on Ninth Street, would be incorporated to create a landscaped lot for 39 cars to be leased to Victorian Row.

"It really just amounts to taking parking away from us and giving it to them," Durante says, adding that the city promised not to take the lot until "adequate" alternative parking is provided.

"So they offered to lease back the lot to us for three years but what would I do then?" Durante asks.

Bert Bangsberg of the redevelopment agency says the city has "bent over backwards to keep Ratto's here," starting when the building Ratto's has occupied at 821 Washington St. since 1936 burned about five years ago.

"At that time, Ratto's didn't own the building and city representatives urged Durante and his partner Ramon Garcia not to leave Oakland. Victorian Row was going to move or we'll have to change. If they want a real place where real people shop, not just a place like Pier 39 where they sell chocolate covered ants or something, we have to have parking."

Even with Ratto's lot, Storek acknowledges he will still have a problem. Including Ratto's, there are not quite 60 parking spaces for all of Victorian Row and that, says Storek, "is not anywhere near enough for a project this size."

"We do have a long-range parking problem. In a sense, maybe it's an immediate problem. We can't even

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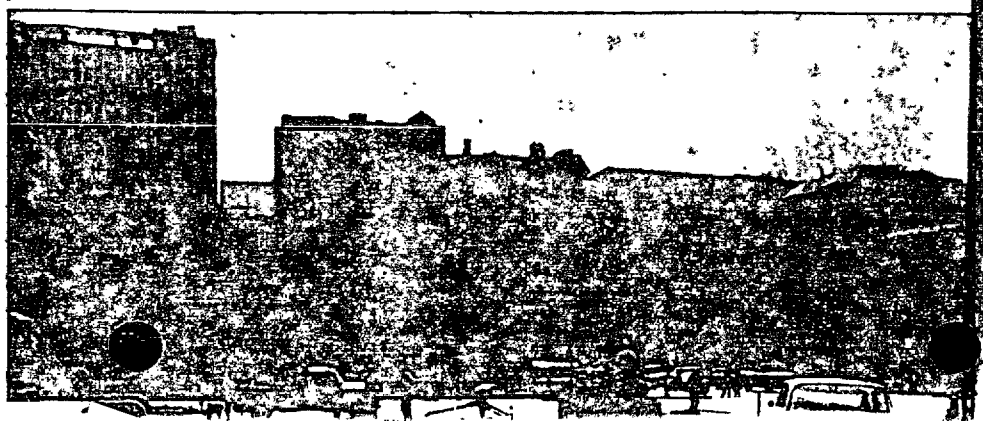

Montclarion/Michael Gray

MARTIN DURANTE, co-owner of Ratto's, says the long-established store will have to move if he's made to give up the parking lot across the street.

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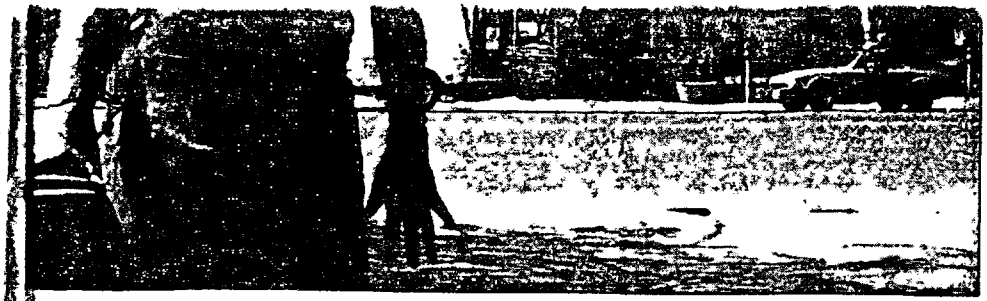

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At that time, Ratto's didn't own the building and city representatives urged Durante and his partner Ramon Garcia not to leave Oakland. Victorian Row was going to be developed, they argued, and the new businesses would help Ratto's business too.

"They've always known we were going to buy their parking lot," Bangsberg adds. "They just never believed it would happen. It just comes down to the basic argument that they don't want to sell."

One reason the city is so anxious to purchase the lot now — in addition to being pressured by Storek and Storek — is that the price will only increase the longer Ratto's holds on to the land. Durante dismisses accusations that he is fighting the sale to drive up the $151,000 he has been offered by the city.

"The lot is priceless to us," he says. "It's not a question of money. We can't survive without the lot. We'll have to move or we'll have to change. If they want a real place where real people shop, not just a place like Pier 39 where they sell chocolate covered ants or something, we have to have parking."

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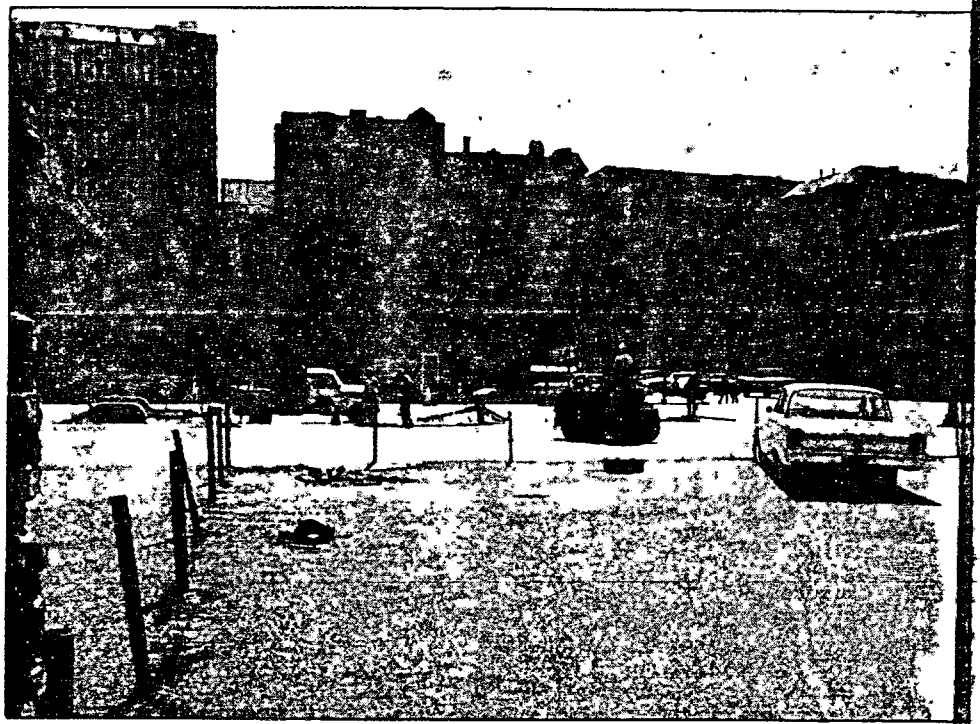
"We do have a long-range parking problem. In a sense, maybe it's an immediate problem. We can't even effectively develop the rest of this project until we solve this problem."

Storek had planned to use the garage being built with the convention center a block away, but when the 500-room Hyatt Regency Hotel was attached to the convention center, Storek said that eliminated his parking.

"Oakland has great public transportation, but it will take time for some people to feel comfortable walking down here from BART. The drug problems, the alcoholism, the pawnshops are all on display. It will take time to dispell that."

"It's not a question of money. We can't survive without the lot. We'll have to move or we'll have to change."



WORKERS PREPARE part of a new parking lot for tenants of Victorian Row while Ratto's battles the city for the rest of the lot.